What Is a Systemically Ageist Organization?

A systemically ageist organization is one in which leaders who create or uphold policies that discriminate against or oppress minors are better able to maintain power. These organizations aren't just ageist by accident; they depend on ageism to survive and thrive.

Compulsory schools are a prime example.

At first glance, schools might seem like places designed for the benefit of youth. But when you look more closely at how power flows within them, a different picture emerges. The people in charge - school principals, superintendents, and school boards - don't answer to students. They serve at the pleasure of parents and teachers, who each benefit massively from maintaining ageist hierarchies.

Teachers benefit from a system that treats children as dependent and incapable. The more the system insists that kids can't learn on their own, the more it justifies the need for a teacher to guide, supervise, and discipline them. That keeps teachers in demand, protects their jobs, and reinforces their authority, even in subjects kids could easily learn in more autonomous ways.

Parents benefit too. Ageist schooling supports a larger framework of control. It trains kids to obey, to sit still, to defer to adults, skills that make them easier to manage at home and help parents fulfill their state-assigned role as controllers of their child's behavior. In this system, "parental rights" often just means the right to dominate youth without resistance.

These forms of power aren't neutral. They come at the direct expense of youth freedom. As long as institutions reward their leaders for upholding these hierarchies, it will be difficult, if not impossible, for youth voices to be taken seriously.

So how do we transform systemically ageist institutions into organizations that truly serve young people?

The answer starts with power. An organization can only be pro-youth if it is democratic and accountable to an electorate of minors. The people in charge: principals, directors, board members, must be chosen by youth and subject to removal by youth at any time. Mechanisms like votes of no confidence, regular elections, and frequent policy referenda must be built into the structure so that young people, not adults, are the deciding force. A truly youth-serving institution is one where a majority of minors can determine both leadership and policy. Stay tuned for more tips on youth rights and fighting ageism!